

X

IS BELIEF IN A MILLENNIUM ESSENTIAL TO CHRISTIAN FAITH?

A THOUSAND years' reign of God upon this earth, when the saints shall govern all things, evil and sin shall be abolished, and justice and love shall prevail—what a dream! Is it anything more than a dream, or more substantial than wishful thinking? Men and women in all ages, oppressed by the tyrannies of evil, have dreamed of this 'consummation devoutly to be wished.' Sometimes, despairing of the future and their fellow-men, they looked back wistfully and saw the Millennium in a lost Golden Age, sunk in the mists of the past. Others, like the Jews, hopeful even amid the oppression of their enemies, looked forward in a challenging faith and declared that with God all things are possible. God, and God alone, could bring it to pass. We admit this. It lies in God's power. The question is—does it lie in God's will?

So many modern religious systems have separated themselves from the ordinary recognized churches on this question of a coming 'Millennium'—what it is, when it may be expected, the conditions of its coming, and the relative importance it should have in Christian living and planning—that some special consideration is due to the whole subject.

In general, the main questions to be considered are these: (i) What is the origin of this belief in some future Millennium of peace and righteousness on this little green earth? (ii) Is there any foundation either

in Scripture or reason for this belief and hope? (iii) Did Jesus and His disciples ever speak of a coming Millennium? (iv) Even if we accept the hope, what place should it have in our Christian thinking? (v) Has the Church given the question fair consideration? By and large, these are the questions I shall ask you to examine.

I

At the outset, mainly to show the importance which this creed seems to hold for some people, I think we should notice how many of what may be called 'the newer religions,' especially those which have originated within the last hundred years, have hived off and gained at least a transient popularity by their predictive preaching about the Second Advent and the Millennium. Among them, for instance, are such systems in America as *Jehovah's Witnesses*, the *Seventh-Day Adventists*, the *Mormons* (with their 'New Jerusalem' ready for the Coming of the Lord), the *Shakers*, and many other lesser-known sects; while here in Great Britain we have had movements like the *Catholic and Apostolic Church* and the *Plymouth Brethren*, all of whom have given a special, if not undue, prominence either to the Second Advent or the possibility of a Millennium at some future time, near or distant, on this earth. By 'undue,' I mean a prominence altogether out of focus and proportion to the whole relevant teaching of Christianity, of which at the best such a doctrine as this can only claim to be a very small part.

We must note carefully that there are two separate and quite different ideas involved in our discussion—on the one hand, the *Second Advent* or Coming of Christ to His people, which is promised in many passages in

the New Testament ; and on the other hand, the notion of a *Millennium* on this earth, which is only mentioned in one pictorial passage in the Book of Revelation.¹ These two conceptions are distinct, and must be kept distinct. It is entirely possible for Christians of all communions and confessions to believe fully in the promised 'Return' of Jesus to His own people, no matter in what form they may regard that Return, and yet lay no emphasis whatever on a *Millennium*—this thousand years of Christ's rule over a cleansed and reformed world.

In the second place, we should observe how often the Church in its wisdom has had to restrain and 'tone down' the wild and unbalanced expectations of many of its members on this question of predicting Christ's Advent. Even as early as Paul's day, many Christians began to expect the quick return of Jesus, their common phrase for which was 'the Day of the Lord.' For instance, the apostle had to write to the Church at Thessalonica warning them, with gentle firmness, against the dangers of these unwise and generally unhealthy expectations. He pointed out in his letter that no man could possibly know anything about 'times and seasons' regarding God's ways and promises, and he strongly counselled them not to let themselves be thrown off their balance by these unprofitable speculations. If and when the Day of the Lord came, it would, he said, come as a 'thief in the night,' *i.e.* at an hour and time which no one could either guess, predict, or compute. He gave it therefore as his counsel that all wise Christians should go quietly about their daily work and duties, that they should neither grow careless nor over-anxious, and that they

¹ Revelation xx.1-10

should live sober, diligent, industrious, and honest lives. This was the only good preparation for Christ's return.

So disturbing were their 'advent' beliefs that in his second letter to the Thessalonians the Apostle reproved them for the grave social disorders that arose from these alarming expectations : ' For we hear that there are some that walk among you disorderly, working not at all, but are busybodies.' His general counsel, not only for them but also for all Christians, was that while they should look forward in quiet faith to the fulfilment of God's promises, they should not concern themselves with idle and irreverent speculation about times and seasons. It was enough to ' watch and be sober.'

Let us notice further, that again and again in the history of the Church similar speculations about the Advent and the Millennium have broken out, almost in epidemic form, and generally with disastrous effects upon the peace, the harmony, and even the reputation of the Church. For instance, in the second century, Montanus, a native of Phrygia and a man of considerable power, began to preach about the Return of Jesus and the coming Millennium ; and this teaching created widespread unrest and division in the young Church. His preaching attracted many influential sympathizers, and his influence on the theology of the young Church persisted for some generations. But in time the saving sanity of the Church prevailed ; and ' Montanism,' as it is now called, came to be regarded everywhere by all thoughtful Christians either as a heresy or as an unbalanced and unprofitable speculation.

Further—a second instance—at the time of the Reformation, the people called the *Anabaptists*—mainly

in Germany, Holland, and Switzerland—founding their doctrines largely on the Apocalypse of John, called for the immediate establishment of the Kingdom of God upon this earth. Unfortunately their ideas fell in only too patly with the dreams of the ‘Peasants’ Revolt’ in Germany, and led to widespread warfare and much brutality and licence. Once again, the whole Church was shocked at the results of this fierce adventist fervour and the licence to which it led; in the end, saddened by its bitter excesses, the Church turned from this creed with mingled sorrow and distaste.

To take another instance, we have the famous *Fifth Monarchy Men* of Oliver Cromwell’s time. Being strongly represented in Cromwell’s army, they argued that the establishment of his power should be made the beginning of a new reign of Christ on earth. They held the theory that there had been four great monarchies in the past, all monarchies of Anti-Christ; but now at last they were about to found the Fifth, the true reign of Jesus Christ in this world. But as on all similar occasions, excess was their undoing. They planned rebellious intrigues among the soldiers, and even plotted the murder of Cromwell, their own leader; and in the end, for the very safety of the Commonwealth and the Church, they had to be repressed.

To finish this short summary, let us recall the constant re-emergence of adventist and millennial theories in recent days in America and Europe. As I have said, many of these ‘newer’ religions owe their origin entirely to the unnatural emphasis which they place on predictive preaching about the Lord’s Return. As is generally the case, this special emphasis tends to dwarf everything else, often to the exclusion of the main body of Christ’s ethical teaching. Such a result happens only

too easily ; for when we isolate or exaggerate any single point in our thinking, it so ruinously tends to dominate everything else.

These few instances of the frequent outbreak of adventist fervour in the history of the Church establish one point beyond all doubt. It is claimed by some modern extra-Church systems that they have only separated themselves from their Christian brethren because, they allege, the great historic Church has not given this doctrine of the Advent and the Millennium sufficient place and prominence. Actually there is only one answer to that : and it is decisive. So far from failing to emphasize this doctrine or give it due consideration, the Church has been constantly forced, all down the centuries, either to restrict or suppress this type of teaching for its own spiritual balance and moral sanity. Every student of history must admit with regret that wherever these adventist creeds have taken hold of the people, from the days of Paul to the latest sect, they have led to unbalanced living and even social excesses. The Church in its experience has learned that ' by their fruits, ye shall know them.'

As a clinching proof of the folly of this sort of thing, allow me to detail here a few selected dates which have been zealously proclaimed, at one time or another, as the ' sure time ' for the coming of the Millennium. From this we shall see two things beyond question—(i) that the Church, throughout its history, has given continuous attention to the Advent ; and (ii) that this whole business of calculating ' times and seasons ' should be wisely suppressed. The following are a few of the recent dates announced in all seriousness for the beginning of the Millennium—1785 by Stilling ; 1836 by Dr. Bengel, the author of the famous Com-

mentary ; 1843 by Miller, the real founder of the Seventh-Day Adventists ; 1866 and 1868 by our own Presbyterian minister, Dr. Cumming of London ; 1890 by the Mormon Church ; and 1914 by Jehovah's Witnesses. Is it not all foolish, unnatural, and uncritical ? The least one can say is that Christians ought by this time to have learned some of the wisdom of Paul, that God's times and seasons are in His own hands alone, and that all human calculations are merely irreligious guessing. Further, there is this obvious remark, that they cannot all be right ! The curious and even laughable thing is that all these differing predictions are based on the same prophetic passages in the Old and New Testaments ! Does this not suggest that what is wrong is not the man who calculates, but the whole notion of any reasonable calculation at all ?

2

With this said, let us consider the issues involved.

First of all, I recall to your notice my earlier statement that all wise Christians should distinguish between two ideas that are often foolishly and fatally confused.

On the one hand, there is the doctrine of the promised return of the Lord to His people. This is based on many references throughout the New Testament, spoken either by Jesus Himself or by His Apostles. According to our particular point of view, each of us may regard this promised Return differently. How different these points of view are may be seen from the following short summary. (i) Some scholars believe that Christ's Advent is already past, claiming that He promised to come in the generation of those who heard Him, and that this Return was realized in the Destruc-

tion of Jerusalem and the ending of the ancient régime of the Jews. (ii) Others say that Jesus returned in His new power at *Pentecost* when God came down among His people and formed the Church of Christ. (iii) Others again assert that His Coming is not strictly an event at all but a *process*, and that Christ has come, and still comes, in every notable advance of His Kingdom on earth. (iv) Others again believe, with Augustine, that Jesus will come in some literal fashion for Judgment, but they postpone it to an indefinite future, asking us to concentrate our thoughts in the meanwhile only on our life here and on the life after death. (v) Others regard the Coming as a *dispensation* and not an event, and they look forward to its fulfilment only when the Kingdoms of this world shall become the Kingdoms of His Christ. (vi) Others again regard it as some actual catastrophic event which will bring our world and civilization to a decisive end.

These differing views merely serve to show how differently Christians in all ages have interpreted the promised presence of Jesus with His people. Meanwhile, the one point to observe is this : all of them believed equally in the Return of Jesus, however differently they may have interpreted that return, and yet few of them have laid any stress on the other doctrine, a coming Millennium ! The reason is obvious. They have recognized that these two ideas—a Second Coming and a Millennium on earth—are quite distinct and must be kept distinct.

3

What then is this doctrine of a Millennium ?

First of all, in contrast with the doctrine of the Second Advent, it is founded, not on the *general teaching*

of the whole New Testament but merely on one lonely passage in a single book.¹ This passage, I need hardly remind you, occurs in a highly pictorial, visionary and dramatic book, one certainly never intended for literal and prosaic interpretation. Moreover, the verses themselves are so vague and obscure that, as I hope to show you later, quite *opposite* views regarding the Millennium have been drawn from them, even by those who are avowed Millenarians and who interpret the passage in its full and literal sense.

Secondly—this seems to me decisive—in any reference of Jesus or His Apostles to His own Advent, no mention whatever is made of this doctrine of a Millennium. The only conclusion to be drawn from this silence is that the idea was not in their thoughts at all. Otherwise, on a topic presumably so important, they would certainly have given some exposition of its place and meaning in Christian thinking to the expectant Christians. This fact ought to be stressed for the comfort of any puzzled people. A modern Christian, let his views of the Bible be what they may, can hold fully and zealously to the promise of Christ's Return—His future *parousia* or presence with His people—without laying any emphasis whatever on a doctrine of a millennial reign of Christ on this earth. The fact that Jesus and His Apostles have never even mentioned a Millennium should be enough for us.

Thirdly, this idea of a *reign of Christ on our earth* appears to most thoughtful Christians as a very gross and unspiritual notion. They believe that it is not only against reason, but also runs counter to the promises of the New Testament, where the future is always

¹ Revelation xx.1-10

pictured as a *spiritual* reunion of our souls with God and Christ.

In point of history, the millennial dream represents an infiltration of crude Jewish ideas of a Messiah's Reign on Earth into the purity of early Christian faith. Amid all their persecutions and troubles, the Jews kept longing for an earthly kingdom of peace and justice, and in these political and sometimes even imperialistic hopes, they often regarded their promised Messiah as an earthly Potentate, who would reign as the great Prince of Power—an idea which so persisted that Jesus Himself had to reprove it constantly among His own disciples and friends. Thus when we remember that neither Jesus nor the Apostles ever made any reference to this political dream of a reformed earthly kingdom, we may confidently set the idea of an earthly Millennium aside.

Lastly, the Book of Revelation is not a book of history or of mere 'long-distance' prediction, but of visions and pictures which were meant to comfort all persecuted Christians, then and now, and to encourage them with the assurance of the final victory of God. To found an elaborate doctrine of a Millennium on one obscure passage in Revelation is bad theology and bad sense.

I deal with this subject for one or two reasons which ought to be clearly stated.

(i) Millenarians use this small obscure passage in Revelation as if it were a key—indeed, the only key—to unlock the rest of Scripture. To them, every other passage in the Testaments, Old as well as New, is coloured and biased by it. Instead of giving these few verses their own proportionate place in the whole, they interpret the whole by them. That is neither good criticism nor good reasoning.

(ii) There is a nauseous endeavour by millenarian supporters, noticeably in America, but also subterraneously here, to make a doctrine of a Millennium a test of orthodoxy and an article of the Christian creed. On any theory of essentials, this is certainly *not* essential to Christian faith and loyalty. I believe that this attempt to bind the Church to certain views on this subject should be strongly resisted. On any interpretation of the Bible, no matter how literal, millenarian views are wholly negligible.

What are millenarian Views?

Millenarians are, of course, strong and pronounced Second Adventists, looking eagerly for the promised Return of the Lord. But many of us, who do not hold their views, may be equally convinced on this question. Please observe that a man does not need to be a Millenarian in order to believe firmly in Christ's Return.

All that is distinctive in the millenarian view springs from a special, and always literal, interpretation of Revelation, xx.1-10. But here at once, Millenarians are split into two utterly opposed camps, with doctrines that are wholly contradictory.

On the one hand there are the *Post-Millennialists*, who believe that the Millennium will come as the fruit of all the present Christian agencies now at work in the world, by the historic redemption of Jesus on the Cross, and by the pervasive working of the Holy Spirit at present in our midst. Then, *after the Millennium*, thus realized by the Church and God's Spirit, Jesus will come—the crown and completion of it all. That is, the Millennium will come first; and the advent of Christ will come afterwards.

On the other hand there are the *Pre-Millenarians*, who

believe that the world is steadily growing worse, that men will finally reject Christ, and that His mission will be proved ineffective as a power to win mankind. Things will become so desperate that Christ will come ; the angel of God will bind Satan for a thousand years ; the martyrs who have been beheaded for the witness of Jesus will be raised from the dead, and will live and reign with Him a thousand years. Then will begin the Millennium on earth, Christ having come first. At the end of the thousand years Satan will be loosed again, and will gather an immense army to attack the saints. But he will be finally destroyed, ' cast into the lake of fire and brimstone.' After this will come the Great Resurrection and the Judgment of Souls. This is the final triumph, and the end of earthly things.

4

Now the first thing to notice is that *from the same passage of Scripture* these two utterly opposed doctrines are drawn. Why? The reason seems obvious to me—they are both trying to make a literal, precise, and verbally accurate interpretation of what is plainly a pictorial and imaginative picture. They are trying to make prose out of poetry.

Mark one thing—if we adopt a strictly literal interpretation, both groups of Millenarians are right—which of course is absurd. On the one hand, the Post-Millenarians are right in saying that nowhere in the passage is it hinted that Jesus comes to the *earth* and reigns with His saints. These martyrs (and it is only the *martyrs*, remember !) rise and join Him, reigning with Him a thousand years. Where? The only presumption is—where Christ already reigns, with God.

And further, it is also true that there is no hint here of a general reign of saints and Christian people. The only people who are mentioned as 'reigning with Christ' are the few 'martyrs' who were beheaded. If we are to be literal, then, strictly literal, there is no ground whatever in this passage for all the elaborate doctrine of the Pre-Millenarians, who picture Christ, and all His Christian people, ruling this world for a thousand years. Strictly literal interpretation, on which alone it claims to be founded, knocks the bottom out of Pre-Millenarianism.

The same is true of the Post-Millenarians. That the present agencies in this world are sure to produce a *perfect age*, a day of universal sainthood on this earth among people such as we are, and that Jesus will only come *after this Millennium has been realized*, is neither according to reasonable knowledge nor according to Scripture.

It should be observed, however, how radically these two schools of Millenarians differ in the implications of their faith. The Pre-Millenarians are hopeless *pessimists*; and the Post-Millenarians are equally hopeless *optimists*.

The former believe that the world is growing deeply and steadily worse. Everything that we rejoice to see—civilization, culture, increasing education, statesmanship, peace proposals, progress in material and mental arts—all these are only false and deceiving signs of progress. In spite of these, the world is turning steadily away from God. Civilization is growing more rotten and vicious, the more extended it becomes. Observe what this means—it means the failure of Christ. His redemption, which we have now in the world, is not fit for the job of saving mankind. So far as the world

is concerned, He has died in vain, for His cross is not able to win, convince, and save mankind.

Hence it needs—this is the argument—*another coming of Jesus* to do what His first advent has failed to effect. All that we can do meanwhile in this rotten decaying world is to sit down and pray for His second coming to wipe evil out and establish the reign of God and righteousness by this great miracle.

Perhaps some may think that I am exaggerating this pessimism? If so, let me quote from an issue of *The Dawn*, a Millenarian magazine, '*All world-reform is broad-based on the denial of every Second Advent prophecy of God: therefore the Holy Ghost is not behind it, and its doom is sealed before it starts.*' (The italics are not my own.) Most Pre-Millenarians are abandoned pessimists; they believe that things are ripening to a crisis of sin and apostasy, which can only be remedied by Christ's advent to reign again in this world. Hence many of them deliberately stand out of politics and social reform, refusing to take any part in the betterment of the world, for they believe that so-called 'reform' is only painting a bad egg! I have heard them denounce even the United Nations Organization and the former League of Nations as being a device of Satan in disguise.

The Post-Millenarians, on the other hand, are hopeless optimists. They believe in an early coming age of triumph which will be brought about by the Spirit of God, through Jesus working in the hearts of men. It is all very beautiful, and I should like to believe it. I regret to say this belief has no foundation in our human experience or in our knowledge of the hearts of sinful and passionate men. In any case I can never rid my mind of the idea that Jesus always regarded His church as being a 'glorious minority' in this world.

The only truth worth knowing is that this whole idea of a Millennium is quite foreign to the mind of Jesus. Surely that reflection should settle the whole matter.

5

Perhaps you will allow me, in summary and for the sake of clearness, to gather up what I want to say in some general observations.

(i) Why do we interpret a book like Revelation with the same literalness as we give to a history like the Gospel of Mark? It is this uncritical and unjudging literalism that is at the root of most of the 'fancy religions.' The Revelation, following the custom of similar books of its day, was written to be a great and exalting ideal for the persecuted Christians. Its sole purpose was to show that, in spite of all afflictions and the apparent power of evil, God's triumph is sure. Its pictures are *pictures*, and should be treated as pictures. Any other method of interpretation leads, as it has so often done, to fanatical absurdities.

(ii) I stress once more that it is only foolish to read prophecy as if it were distant historical *prediction*. Prophecy is not history written beforehand; and certainly it is not a hidden map of the future! The writer of the Revelation assuredly did not know more about the future than Jesus did; and we know that Jesus said emphatically that of these times and seasons He Himself knew nothing. Moreover, had there been any Millennium on earth to which we should look forward, Our Lord most certainly would not have been silent regarding it. All prophecy, even Christ's, must be taken as the declaration of great moral ends and the ripening of spiritual purposes. The one thing we

can always rule out, even in the prophets, is mere long-distance *prediction* about future generations.

(iii) It would be a ghastly thing—and a serious reflection on God—to imagine that He had cruelly hidden such amazing news under cryptic devices and curious cyphers—so cryptic indeed that serious Christians, on poring over these records, extract diametrically opposite views from the same passages. The irreverent fashion in which many people use pictorial books like Daniel and Revelation, with calculations of dates and times and seasons, reflects on their notion of God—that He would hide deep and important things from simple souls under these devices. I refuse thus to dishonour God, the Father of Jesus Christ.

(iv) The idea of a Millennium on earth, with Christ reigning here—and even Revelation never states this—is not only a gross and unspiritual idea, but is quite inconsistent with the rest of New Testament teaching. I find it quite hopeless to try to fit it in. Outside of this pictorial ‘vision’ in Revelation xx.1–10, I can find no hint whatever in the Bible of this idea of a long and glorious reign of Jesus on this little world. This need not affect any man’s belief in the Lord’s Return. We may hold to Christ’s Return as a valid promise, either being realized now, or yet to be realized in unexpected ways ; but I cannot help feeling that this Jewish idea of a Millennium, which the author of Revelation incorporated in his picture, has no real connection with a strong acceptance of the Second Advent. This material dream has no place that I can see in any other New Testament writings ; and it had no place whatever in the thoughts of Jesus or of His Apostles.

(v) Wherever millennial views (chiefly pre-millen-

arian views) have been accepted, they have led unfortunately, though not unexpectedly, to the wildest extravagances—idleness, neglect, excitement, and unbalanced emotion. It is pathetic to read of these fanciful calculations in which so many Millenarians have indulged, to the loss of all sobriety, industry, and reason. I do not know how often the end of the world has been predicted, or the beginning of the Millennium. In my reading, I have come upon systems whose whole 'reason for being' rests on extravagant calculations of the Advent of Christ. I need hardly say that the calculations have all been falsified. The whole business seems so unlike the Master, who said, 'Of that day and that hour knoweth no man, no, not the angels which are in heaven, neither the Son, but the Father.'

(vi) As I have hinted, pre-millenarian views in particular reflect on the adequacy of the mission of Jesus Christ. In spite of God's offered salvation and His Spirit among men, the world is growing steadily and surely worse; only the physical and catastrophic Return of Jesus can win the world or conquer evil.

But even on their own view, *does it win the world?* Evidently, after the Millennium, there is to be an immense revolt from God and a huge Satanic struggle. After a thousand years of the rule of Christ—that?

But apart from the fact that God's redemption in Christ is unavailing, the charge that the world is steadily growing worse is not true. In every way that counts, in spite of surface appearances, and especially tested in the long views of history, there is more of the mind and spirit of God in the hearts of men than ever there was. I believe that the Spirit of Our Lord is quietly but steadily permeating every department of our life and thinking, and that its greatest triumphs are

yet to come. That this should be the natural course of His influence, He Himself suggested in countless sayings and parables, where He spoke of the gradual leavening of the whole lump by His Spirit. If it were not so, every genuine effort for Christian reform and work would be paralysed. There would be no use for preaching, and no place for missions ; for the one sure way then to hasten the Coming of Jesus and to bring in the New Heaven would be to stand aside and let the world sink the quicker and surer into its own hell.

In any case, is it not time that we stopped this wretchedly unhistorical treatment of the Old Testament ? To bring forward the pictorial visions of Daniel and link them with the equally imaginative visions of Revelation, and on these to found a theory of a Millennium, to which there is no reference anywhere else, is beyond all reason. Our duty as Christians is much plainer and simpler than this. Let us be loyal to Jesus, working His will in us and in the world, labouring in His strength for a redeemed world. If we are content to do this immediate duty, we can leave the future in the hands of God. That is where Jesus Himself left it.

There is a charming story told of Professor Calderwood of Edinburgh University. When one of our infrequent earthquakes shook Edinburgh years ago, the professor's housekeeper rushed into his study in wild alarm. 'Oh, sir, it is the end of the world, and the day of judgment ! And you, sir, sitting there so unconcerned at your desk writing a lecture you may never deliver.' The professor looked up and said, with a smile, 'Martha, if it is the Day of the Lord, what better could I be doing than just my next duty ?' If we are interested in the Day of the Lord, let us prepare for it like the professor.